

NEWS ARTICLE: 01.07.04

MY NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION: NO MORE COUCH POTATO

by Senator Beverly S. Hammerstrom

Just like many other people, I always look at the new year as an opportunity to make changes for the better in my life. This year, because of a new caucus I helped create in the Legislature, I now have an action plan --reinforced by a challenge.

As Chair of the Senate Health Policy committee, I am only too aware of the increasing costs of providing health care in this state. Much of this is a result of the changing dynamics in providing health care. When Social Security was adopted in this country in 1935, elderly Americans led relatively healthy lives and death was usually caused by a catastrophic illness. Today, we as Americans tend to live fairly unhealthy life styles, develop multiple chronic illnesses and because of modern technology and medications, live for many years with these multiple conditions. Hence, we see continually rising health care costs, be they in private insurance, Medicare or Medicaid. Costs will only increase as the baby boomers begin to develop these chronic illnesses.

During a health care forum this past summer, my colleagues and I were provided much information in regard to the epidemic of chronic illnesses and their fiscal implications. Some of this, of course, we have no control over - it's in the genes, but we were surprised to learn that risk factors for many such illnesses can be reduced easily and inexpensively by increasing physical activity a mere 10%.

Statistics show that 55% of Michigan adults are classified as physically inactive. Adults are considered to be physically inactive if they engage in less than 30 minutes of moderate physical activity at least five days per week. The estimated expense of this inactivity in health insurance costs, workers' compensation, lost productivity and Medicaid is \$8.9 billion per year in Michigan. Of that, more than \$8.6 billion was in direct costs, resulting in a \$1,175 price tag for each Michigan adult resident in 2002.

Costs associated with physical inactivity will inevitably increase due to Michigan's aging population. If Michigan residents do not increase their physical activity levels, the state's economy will suffer increasingly heavy costs as aging adults endure premature and/or recurrent illnesses. However, a cost avoidance of approximately \$575 million per year over the next four years can be realized if only one in 20 sedentary adults becomes physically active and remains active during this time frame. Financially, this annual cost savings would be sufficient to pay for more than 14,300 new employees in Michigan, who in turn, would add to the tax base and buying power of the state's economy.

To that end, the Michigan Legislature has formed a health caucus and will be leading by example. The Healthy Michigan Caucus members will be provided monthly information in regard to specific chronic illnesses and their impact on the state. But more importantly, we are challenging caucus members to participate in a 16-week program of walking each day and

logging in their steps in an effort to achieve 10,000 steps per day. Walking increases your cardiovascular health, energy level, and physical activity level. It is easy and convenient and works well with extremely busy legislative schedules that do not lend themselves to time at the gym. Participating members will log their weekly steps, and a challenge has been issued - members of the House, Senate and Executive Office/Cabinet have been invited to participate. As Chair of Senate Health Policy, naturally I am participating and have encouraged all members of my caucus to participate as well.

That having been said, I never realized how difficult it would be to achieve 10,000 steps per day. The first day wearing a pedometer, I achieved a grand total of 3,245 steps! I had a long way to go! But now my life style has changed in an effort to increase the level of steps I take each day. Little did I realize that a daily routine which included many miles driving in a car or sitting in meetings did not generate many steps. My modest 1960s ranch house or my small Lansing apartment do not afford me the benefit of generating steps as I go about my daily routine. I will have to make a very concerted effort to increase my steps if I intend to reach that 10,000 step goal. And I have. When parking now, I do not choose the closest parking spot but one farther away that will allow me to accumulate steps. When I leave my office to go to session, I do not take the elevator which is right outside my door, but rather I walk to the elevator in the center of the Capitol. Upon returning to my office from session, I've succeeded in adding 772 steps to my daily count. I know if I walk to Beaner's, the local coffee house, I will add 1,993 steps to my daily total. A trip around the Capitol perimeter will allow me to add 1,265 more. The most steps I have been able to accumulate in any given day is 9,432 - on New Year's Day when we were parked at the farthest parking lot for the Rose Bowl Game. Everyone else was complaining about the trek; I was gleefully counting steps!

Wearing a pedometer has literally changed my life - and hopefully for the better. Unlike the health club venue, this steps program fits easily into my daily schedule. If I get home at night and don't have many steps, I can always take a walk around the block or around my apartment complex to increase the number of steps. I have found ways to increase my steps in the normal course of daily activity, and while I have not yet achieved that desired rate of 10,000 steps per day, I can see the potential of being able to do so. If I can reach that goal, I know that I personally will reduce the amount of health care dollars that will be spent on my life in the years ahead and just might increase my years on earth. That is my New Year's Resolution, and this is one I intend to keep.